Social Media and the Emergence, Establishment and Transformation of the Right-Wing Populist Finns Party

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Abstract

This paper assesses the significance of social media for the Finns Party and the related anti-immigration movement from 2007 to the present day, in light of theories on the relationship of populism and social media. These include people-centrism, disenfranchisement, homophily, the attention economy, media elitism, and (lack of) communicative resources. Tracing the historical trajectory of the Finnish anti-immigration movement and the Finns Party, I argue that the Finnish case is an example of a movement being born online and using social media to build a political identity and strategically gain influence through a party, eventually transforming it from the inside out – rather than the party strategically using social media for its purposes, as is sometimes assumed in party-centric literature. While acknowledging the continued importance of parties, research on contemporary populist movements must take into account the political engagement of citizens facilitated by online media.

Keywords: populism, Finns Party, social media, online media, countermedia, alternative media, anti-immigration, right-wing populism

Introduction

Online communication has been identified as a central theme in the study of populism, and the rise of social media – with its various effects on the public sphere – has at times even been argued to be a central cause of the success of (right-wing) populist parties (see Engesser, Fawzi and Larsson 2017; Groshek and Koc-Michalska 2017; Krämer 2017).[1] Populists are claimed to be particularly adept at using online media for electoral gains and to benefit from the simplification and polarization fostered by social media. This area of research has particularly focused on Facebook and Twitter, the election of Donald Trump in the United States, and German and Italian radical right populist parties (see e.g. Bracciale and Martella 2017; Stier et al. 2017).

[1] A terminological note: I understand populism as a type of political argumentation which pits a pure 'people' against a corrupt 'elite' (see Ylä-Anttila 2017). Rather than a matter of either/or, populism is a matter of degree: some political actors use populist argumentation more than others rather than some actors being 'populist' and some not (see Aslanidis 2015). I will nevertheless call actors commonly employing populist argumentation 'populists' as a convenient shorthand. Most populist movements in contemporary Europe are right-wing in that they often reference and politically exclude a group of 'Others', such as immigrants, which the populists claim the elite immorally favours, instead of the people which the elite should serve (see Moffitt 2016). However, the arguments made here about the compatibility of online communication and populism are not limited to right-wing populism, but apply to populism more broadly.

The case of the Finns Party provides an example where social media has been pivotal in the emergence and establishment of a party, but not always on its own initiative, and not always in a straightforwardly positive way for the party itself. The relationship between the party and social media has certainly not been without conflict (Hatakka 2017). This article seeks to answer: what was the role of social media in the emergence, establishment and transformation of the Finns Party, and the Finnish anti-immigration movement more broadly?

I propose a broad definition of social media as any online media which enables users to communicate horizontally, publishing content to each other rather than merely consuming information top-down, thus creating (semi)-public spheres of communication, which may be used to discuss and do politics. Particularly, this definition includes blogs on which readers may comment as well as discussion boards, which have been tremendously influential to the Finns Party. I do not limit the concept of social media to only refer to the commonly mentioned services such as Facebook and Twitter, which place more emphasis on a social network of user profiles than blogs and forums do. The political use of such social networks is often fairly similar to that of blogs and discussion boards (though further complicated by the logic of the "feed" and related algorithms). With this broad definition, most online media are in fact social media, with the exception of websites which do not take advantage of any of the interactive affordances offered by the internet, and as such, merely replicate a traditional mass media top-down logic online. As such, the "socialness" (that is, interactivity) of online media varies.[2]

The origins of the Finns Party are in the agrarian populism of the Finnish Rural Party (1959–1995, see Ylä-Anttila 2012; Jungar and Jupskås 2014). Founded in its predecessor's ruins in 1995, initially the Finns Party closely followed this tradition (Arter 2012), employing messages of anti-elitism, anti-capitalism, economic justice, poverty relief, anti-corruption and welfare populism. They remained marginal until the 2010s, during a stable period of coalition governments formed by moderate mainstream parties, lasting from the 1980s to 2011 (Ylä-Anttila and Ylä-Anttila 2015). But the party's popularity skyrocketed in the 2011 elections, they were included in government in 2015, and split into a moderate and a hard-line anti-immigration faction in 2017. While the moderate splinter group faltered, the hard-line anti-immigration wing came out on top, and is now polling as the largest party with a margin of several percentage points (HS 22 Jan 2020). The inclusion of a radical-right anti-immigration movement, built in online blogs and on discussion forums, combined with a favourable opportunity structure, was the central change behind this dramatic development which made the Finns Party a fairly typical immigration-focused radical-right populist party (Ylä-Anttila and Ylä-Anttila 2015; Jungar and Jupskås 2014).

[2] Most of the media mechanisms and affordances discussed in this article rely on the peer-to-peer interaction affordances offered by social media. But even media that only allow one-way communication, such as blogs without a commenting feature, can of course be used to circumvent gatekeepers and as such differ from traditional mainstream media. For example, former Finns Party chairman Timo Soini, the figurehead of the rural populist tradition of the Finnish Rural Party, did run a popular blog for several years, enabling him to communicate directly to supporters, but his blog always lacked a commenting feature, significantly limiting its potential for mobilization (Niemi 2013, 81).

This article details the trajectory of the relationship between this online movement and the Finns Party, in light of the research literature on populism and social media. This trajectory culminated in what the party chairman from 1997 to 2017, Timo Soini, described as a coup (Soini 2017), when the influential anti-immigration blogger Jussi Halla-aho was elected chairman in the summer 2017 party convention. What resulted was the demise of the moderate wing and renewed popularity of the now radical-right Finns Party in the hands of the new leadership.

Populist parties tend to be good at garnering media attention, not always positive in tone. But for these parties, any publicity is often good publicity (Moffitt 2018). This is because the core message of these parties is compatible with a derisive, even conspiratorial view of the media – the fact that the media paints populists in a negative light simply proves the populists' point about the media being corrupt and unreliable, part of the societal elite – whereas the populists, clearly, are something different. Ellinas (2018) argues that mainstream media coverage can validate the importance, influence and legitimacy of a newcomer. This unquestionably happened in Finland, where the media landscape was dominated, in the run-up to the Finns Party's breakthrough 2011 election, by the "Finns Party friendly" themes of immigration, the Euro crisis, perceived corruption of mainstream politicians, and the meteoric rise of the Finns Party itself in the polls (Ylä-Anttila and Ylä-Anttila 2015; Kantola, Vesa and Hakala 2011; Pernaa 2012; Pernaa and Railo [eds.] 2012). But online and social media have been even more influential in shaping the party and establishing its current form, I will claim.

I will first review the wider research literature on online media and populism. Then, I will move on to describing the influence of social media for the emergence, establishment and re-shaping of the Finns Party from 2007 onwards, up to the present day, based on research and media sources, and culminating in the 2017 change of the party leadership. I pay special attention to the connections and influences between the anti-immigration discussion board Hommaforum[3], the right-wing populist "countermedia" website WTF Media (MV-lehti)[4], and the Finns Party. Finally, I draw together the previous literature and the case at hand, to analyse the relationship between the Finns Party and social media in light of each of the theoretical arguments.

Online media and populism

It is often either merely assumed that online communication fosters populism, or the connection is observed without explaining the theoretical mechanism behind the connection (see Gross 2009). But in their excellent review of the literature of online media and populism, Engesser, Fawzi and Larsson (2017) argue that there are certain core compatibilities between populism and the opportunities

[3] The name 'homma' (lit. 'thing' or 'job') comes from the somewhat obscure idiom 'homma nousuun', literally translated as '[let's put this] thing onto an upward path/trajectory', meaning roughly 'a toast to the advancement of our cause'. This is an ironic reference to historical Finnish neo-Nazi leader Väinö Kuisma using this expression in the documentary film *Sieg Heil Suomi* (1994), in which Finnish neo-Nazis are presented in a rather unflattering light; as such the name of the forum is likely a piece of self-deprecating humor rather than a positive self-identification with Nazism.

[4] The website was first named 'Mitä Vittua?! -lehti', literally 'What The Fuck?! News', later simply known as MV Media, which I translate here as WTF Media.

afforded by online communication. Their contribution has often been simplified to merely an argument that "audiences might get an increasing share of their information from political actors directly" (de Vreese et al. 2019, 245), but this so-called direct communicative link is an oversimplification. In fact, Engesser, Fawzi and Larsson (2017) make four particularly compelling and nuanced points about the link between online communication and populism, which I will now introduce and contextualize with additional literature, and to which I will add two more.

Firstly, since populism is based on people-centrism, such a message works best when conveyed via a medium that is people-centric, or in the case of the internet, user-centric (Galpin and Trenz 2019; Gerbaudo 2014). The promise of online communication has been its democratizing potential, since all users are theoretically horizontal, anyone can publish and participate. Of course, going beyond naïve techno-optimism, we now know that the form this participation takes tends to be polarizing, acrimonious and populist; but it is still a result of the internet's horizontalism. Not just people-centrism, but the other side of the populist coin – anti-elitism – is perhaps particularly facilitated by the internet, since it "favors non-elite actors", emphasizing the so-called wisdom of crowds (Engesser, Fawzi and Larsson 2017, 1286; see also Keen 2007). A variation of this argument is that the rise of social media as a societal development has generally "weakened citizen trust in politics and expertise" (Moffitt 2018, 235) – of course, this argument is not new (see e.g. Keen 2007), but it has certainly gained credibility in the recent years, and has been hinted to influence Finns Party politics as well (Ikäheimo 2017).

Secondly, the internet is where supporters of populist politics increasingly are – which has created a conundrum for the Finns Party, as we will see. Populism often relies on appealing to disenfranchised or marginalized supporters, the "reluctantly political" (Taggart 2000, 3), and the internet makes for a particularly good recruitment pool for such people, since those disappointed in mainstream media and politics tend to turn to social media (Ellinas 2018). Furthermore, and crucially, digital platforms not only make communication possible, but in many cases, make *community* possible, similarly to offline associations, societies, clubs, informal groups of friends, political parties and their various local organizations, NGOs, etc.:

> "Online platforms provide an environment wherein individuals can socialize themselves into a right-wing populist worldview, adopt corresponding practices, symbols, and esthetics as part of their lifestyle, and, thereby, express a right-wing populist identity they have developed [...] Users find concepts and interpretations of social phenomena that lead to a crystallization of previously latent, less specific, and clear-cut attitudes and grievances." (Krämer 2017, 1302)

Thirdly, and relatedly, the internet – and social media in particular – facilitates homophily: echo chambers and filter bubbles, where like-minded people communicate only with each other, leading to polarization. This is perhaps the most commonly mentioned mechanism between social media and the rise of populism, at least in the mainstream press. But it can be argued that this assessment is quite US-centric, not as applicable to multi-party democracies such as Finland – and even in the US, it is not empirically backed as strongly as one may think. There are also indications to the contrary: that

social media may in fact be particularly good at exposing users to opposing views, which should, according to the echo chamber theory, facilitate healthy debates (Flaxman, Goel and Rao 2016; Karlsen et al. 2017), but may in fact accelerate polarization (Bail et al. 2018).

Fourthly, and perhaps most importantly, "features of populist style, such as simplification, emotionalization, and negativity, are perfectly in line with the Internet's attention economy" (Engesser, Fawzi and Larsson 2017, 1286). This observation about populism providing what the media needs has of course been made with regards to media in general (e.g. Moffitt 2016, 74–77), but the competition over attention is made ever fiercer by the advent of digital and social media. Online, the popularity of content is not dictated by its quality, but its ability to grab attention and arouse emotion, particularly anger (Berger and Milkman 2012).

I would like to add a fifth element that Engesser, Fawzi and Larsson do not explicitly mention but populists themselves often do: they tend to "accuse the traditional media system of being controlled by mainstream political elites, and therefore they consider the new social media as the only neutral and independent arena" (Manucci 2017, 475; also see Engesser et al. 2017, 1113). And, of course, the populists are right in this, to an extent: journalism has its gatekeepers, making media access for newcomers more difficult, which populists can circumvent via online media (Ellinas 2018). This ties in with the second point above: not only are populist politicians drawn to social media, but so are those citizens that are disappointed in the mainstream media, who are also often those disappointed with mainstream politics, thus potential populist voters and activists.

And finally, a sixth factor is that new, outsider, challenger parties simply seldom have the communication resources of more established parties, which would enable them to have influence in the mainstream media, which makes online media an inviting opportunity for them to spread their messages, organize and mobilize – a central feature that made the Finns Party rely on online grassroots mobilization (Hatakka 2017, Moffitt 2018). An online "alternative public sphere may be especially important for marginalized groups", like right-wing populists (Sakki and Pettersson 2016, 158). Furthermore, such communication enables grassroots political participation much more readily than traditional media, because of "the interactive and collaborative features of a blog, that is, that the readers can communicate directly with the blogging politician" (Sakki and Pettersson 2016, 158), which "allow[s] the blogger to involve his readers in dialogue and collaborative meaning-making, which creates a sense of togetherness and like-mindedness" (Sakki and Pettersson 2016, 167). In this sense, the reasons for turning to online communication may be simple realities such as lacking resources, but social media can end up being a surprisingly significant asset, since it can particularly facilitate a populist form of communication, which hinges on the creation of 'a people'. The other side of that coin is potential loss of control over the communicative identity of the party.

All in all, Engesser, Fawzi and Larsson (2017, 1286) conclude, "populism is particularly well-suited to be communicated online". It should be noted that not all populist messages in online media originate from populist parties, like many accounts of populism on social media tend to assume – and that populist parties may interact in complex ways with (social) media and its discourses and networks,

especially in a hybridized media space where mass media panders to the social media logic, and social media feeds to mass media (Chadwick 2016; Herkman and Matikainen 2017). A particular way in which populists tend to interact with the media sphere while utilizing online media, one that is particularly compatible with the populist agenda and the logics of online media as presented above, is that of re-framing mainstream media messages (Ylä-Anttila, Bauvois and Pyrhönen 2019; Hatakka 2018). This and other online media dynamics will be discussed next in the context of the emergence and establishment of the Finns Party.

The roots of the Finnish online anti-immigration movement

Rather than coming into being within the Finns Party per se, the Finnish anti-immigration movement was born online and from international influences (see e.g. Hatakka 2017; Pyrhönen 2015), an example of right-wing populist discourse transcending national borders with the help of online media (Moffitt 2018; Sakki and Pettersson 2016, 167). The Finns Party became the vessel for this movement, and during this process, the online movement significantly shaped Finns Party politics, namely its transformation from a rural-populist social justice platform to a right-wing anti-immigration platform between the 2007 and 2011 elections, and certainly after 2011, culminating in the 2017 party convention. This process is traced in what follows.

The founding of the anti-immigration discussion board Hommaforum came about after discussions in Jussi Halla-aho's blog's guestbook – who we will later see rise to the leadership of the Finns Party. The blog had been active since 2003, a time when Halla-aho was a doctoral candidate in Slavic studies at the University of Helsinki. The blog was part of the so-called counter-Jihadist movement, and mostly deals with discontents over the perceived Islamization of Europe, including claimed incompatibility of Islamic cultures with Western ones, crimes committed by immigrants etc., and the failures of multiculturalism, linking to international counter-Jihad blogs such as Gates of Vienna. The blog found a loyal readership, many of whom were also members of the nationalist organization Suomen Sisu, like Halla-aho himself, and the blog's guestbook became an unofficial discussion forum for people interested in nationalist politics and anti-Islam ideas, eventually resulting in the founding of Hommaforum in December 2008.

Some of the founding members of Hommaforum were members of Suomen Sisu as well, including Matias Turkkila, who in 2012 also became part of the Finns Party establishment, as the editor of the party newspaper Suomen Uutiset. During his tenure the newspaper's style has become confrontational and "social media friendly": it publishes pieces in which the claims of their opponents are "debunked", and its Facebook page posts these, to be shared by the party's supporters, complemented with snarky commentary, sarcastically lamenting the short-sightedness of multiculturalism – as well as gloating over the demise of "traditional media" (HS 12 Nov 2016).

Into the Finns Party

The discussions over entering party politics to push the anti-immigration agenda started on Hommaforum almost immediately after its founding, but there was no consensus on which party should be chosen. Halla-aho was now a Finns Party councilman in the Helsinki city council, elected in 2008, having previously run for parliament on the Finns Party ticket in 2007. But he was not a member of the party, and in both elections he had been declared as an independent candidate not committed to the party platform. It seemed the party leadership was not sure what to think of Halla-aho either, or his budding political career for that matter, as he was denied candidacy in the European elections of 2009. This was the first time his supporters on Hommaforum were truly confronted with the fact that pushing their agenda through the Finns Party was not necessarily going to be easy. They had already taken initiative and started a campaign to collect supporter cards, 2000 of which would be legally required to field a fully independent candidate outside of a registered party, in case the Finns Party would not take Halla-aho. The campaign did come up with 3700 of said cards, more than enough; however, Halla-aho eventually announced he would not run at all in order to not fracture the "immigration-critical" movement (HS 27 Apr 2009) by openly going against the Finns Party leadership. He eventually joined the party in October 2010.

With the 2011 parliamentary elections coming up and immigration firmly on the media agenda (Kantola, Vesa and Hakala 2011; Pernaa 2012), the uneasy relationship between the online anti-immigration movement and the Finns Party resulted in discussions on Hommaforum about various parties through which the anti-immigration message could be advocated. Many activists decided to go with the Finns Party, like their "Master" (as they more or less satirically call Halla-aho). Others chose the moderate-right National Coalition (Kokoomus), while still others founded a new party altogether; Muutos 2011 (Change 2011), which focused on direct democracy. In fact, its manifesto was collaboratively authored on Hommaforum; an interesting precursor to the later "online direct democracy" experiments by populist parties such as the Five Stars Movement (M5S) in Italy. However, Change 2011 failed to attract well-known names as candidates, and failed to elect a single candidate in the 2011 parliamentary elections.[5]

The Finns Party, however, were doing well, with the majority of Hommaforum activists deciding to support them in the run-up to the 2011 election. For the first time, the party had a noticeable anti-immigration wing, of which Halla-aho was the lead candidate. In effect, the organically organized activists of Hommaforum formed an online anti-immigration think-tank for the party (Eranti and Lindman 2014, 106). The party organization itself, which in 2011 was still mostly controlled by the traditionalist, rural-populist wing, campaigned little and unprofessionally, due to a very limited budget (Moring and Mykkänen 2012), which further emphasized the importance of the grassroots online mobilization. The anti-immigration faction consolidated itself by authoring and publishing,

[5] Incidentally, they did get one MP later on, when MP James Hirvisaari was expelled from the Finns Party: he joined the supposedly-defunct Change 2011 in 2013, forming a one-man parliamentary group until 2015.

independently of the party platform, their own manifesto on immigration, calling for an end to multiculturalism, the Aloof Election Manifesto *(Nuiva vaalimanifesti,* Nykänen 2016). There were 13 signatories, several of whom were Suomen Sisu activists, Hommaforum users, and bloggers; among them Jussi Halla-aho, Juho Eerola, James Hirvisaari, and Olli Immonen (Sakki and Pettersson 2016, 160). Halla-aho also conducted a crowdfunding campaign previously unseen in Finnish politics, and Immonen stated that Hommaforum was his main campaign tool (Eranti and Lindman 2014, 102). Six of the signatories were elected, along with a total of 39 Finns Party MPs (out of a parliament of 200), a landslide in the Finnish context of multi-party consensual democracy. This cemented the Finns Party as the voice for anti-immigration sentiment in Finnish politics; however, tensions remained over to what extent the party should focus on immigration and immigration only, and how strict, exactly, should its position towards immigration be. The party did not enter government, preferring to remain in opposition.

Infighting and scandal

The internal tensions were not eased by the multiple scandals around Hommaforum activists in the mainstream media during the legislative term 2011–2015. These included the court case and eventual criminal conviction of Jussi Halla-aho for hate speech in 2009–2012, which Halla-aho maintains was a result of a misunderstanding of satire. In 2013, social media photos emerged taken by MP James Hirvisaari in the assembly chamber of the House of Parliament, in which Seppo Lehto, a well-known extreme-right activist, while visiting Hirvisaari, gives the Nazi salute to the camera. Hirvisaari was expelled from the party. In 2015, social media photos surfaced of MP Olli Immonen posing with members of the neo-Nazi Finnish Resistance Movement.

Among the online anti-immigration movement, these scandals were, of course, largely understood as "'witch-hunts' organized by the 'elite-controlled media'" (Pyrhönen 2015, 123). And whenever chairman Soini, who had reluctantly accepted the anti-immigrationists into the party, did not fully support them when they were accused of racism, instead siding with their critics and reprimanding them, Hommaforum users naturally were disappointed and questioned their decision to support the Finns Party (Hatakka 2017, 2031). Particularly in the case of the expulsion from the party of central Hommaforum activists, "angry messaging on the discussion board started to gain characteristics of organized mutiny against Soini's leadership" (Hatakka 2017, 2032). Indeed, this mutiny brewed beneath the surface and took the form of an actual organized (and ultimately successful) attempt to change the party leadership in 2017.

Out with the old, in with the new

Timo Soini, a veteran of the preceding Finnish Rural Party, had led the Finns Party since 1997 without facing serious challengers. Announcing his retirement in March 2017, he expressed pride in building up the party from the ashes, but also some regret for "some of the things that have been built up with it" (MTV News 5 Mar 2017), a thinly veiled reference to the rise of the anti-immigration movement, facilitated by his party. The next morning, the party held a press conference to announce the candidacy

of MEP Sampo Terho for chairman, complete with perfectly-timed tweets of support from several popular names of the party. Terho was presented by the party leaders as Soini's follower, someone who could keep the party's agrarian-populist and anti-immigration factions united. But Halla-aho challenged the party establishment openly, announcing his own candidacy soon thereafter, with support from Hommaforum. Online, activists had started a campaign as early as September 2016 to get as many supporters as possible to register as party members, making them eligible to vote in the convention, in a discussion thread bluntly named "Campaign to change the Finns Party chairman 2017 – Out with Soini!"

The campaign proved successful, and Halla-aho beat party elite favorite Terho on the first round of voting on 10 June 2017. All vice-chair positions were also filled with representatives of the online-born anti-immigration movement, by landslide numbers. The movement had completed its long-standing project, started in 2008, to push its agenda through the Finns Party – "a coup", in the words of ousted leader Soini (Soini 2017). This quickly led to the party splitting in half: Soini-loyal politicians defected, founding their own group (which failed to win any seats in the 2019 election), whereas the Finns Party was now free to focus on the immigration issue above all else.

For the Finns Party, the story of social media has not been one of the party adopting new technology to communicate from the top down, rather one of a grassroots social media movement gradually taking over the party (Hatakka 2017), and largely orchestrating the party's turn from its rural populist roots to the anti-immigration right (Ylä-Anttila and Ylä-Anttila 2015). Why did the party let them in, despite the risk of loss of control (Carlson, Djupsund and Strandberg 2013; Eranti and Lindman 2014)? Because they initially provided the party with crucial resources, including an online presence, activists, discursive assets, not to mention voters, all of which the party could not have grown without (Hatakka 2017, 2027). During this process, Hommaforum effectively became the online wing of The Finns Party, even though it initially had no official connection to the party machinery; also in the eyes of the public, who came to regard communication by nominally unaffiliated Hommaforum activists as de facto Finns Party communication (Hatakka 2017, 2033). In the end, the "takeover" of the party by anti-immigration activists was perhaps only seen as a hostile takeover by the previous party establishment. Supporters, as well as the general public, had long ago started viewing Hommaforum and the Finns Party as either integrated or at least strongly affiliated.

New populist media?

The most recent development regarding social media and populism is the proliferation of partisan news sites online (or *alternative media, countermedia),* enabled by the erosion of media gatekeepers and the democratizing effect of free and easy-to-use online publishing (Moffitt 2018). Eschewing mainstream journalistic standards, sites such as Breitbart in the US, Fdesouche in France and WTF Media in Finland, have engaged in re-framing news events from a populist right-wing perspective (Hatakka 2018). This has made the relationship between political populism and the communication

of knowledge a salient issue in research, as it is particularly populists who have been accused of "post-truth politics", eschewing facts (Ylä-Anttila 2018).

However, while WTF Media re-frames news events, and selectively cherry-picks material, the argumentation used in its content – as well as on Hommaforum – mostly do not conform to the claim that populist knowledge tends to be explicitly based on "common sense" or "everyday knowledge", and positioning itself against experts. Quite to the contrary, like most discussants on Hommaforum, WTF Media itself frames its argumentation strongly through what it considers to be "objective facts", claiming to adhere to strict rules of logic and empiricism, whereas their opponents, the "multiculturalists", are framed as emotional and unscientific because of their "post-modernist" theoretical stances (Ylä-Anttila 2018). Thus, the anti-immigration movement does not seem to be "epistemologically populist", defined as a reliance on folk wisdom and eschewing expert knowledge (Saurette and Gunster 2011) – so central are appeals to factual evidence and the expert position of Jussi Halla-aho in the movement's discourse. In fact, this type of empiricist and counter-expert argumentation seems to be typical of the Finnish online populist right (Mäkinen 2016; Nykänen 2016; Sakki and Pettersson 2016; Saresma 2014), and sharply divides it stylistically from the Finns Party's previously dominant, 'folksy' agrarian-populist wing. Whether this mode of argumentation is at least partly a result of the fact that this movement was born online, or simply a result of the ideology of the movement being compatible with such a style, would require further empirical research – although there are hints that "discussion forum politics" indeed favours a type of "scientistic" argumentation overly reliant on citable and measurable "facts" about complex issues of moral values and political ideologies (Ylä-Anttila 2018).

I noted previously that the overlap between Hommaforum and the anti-immigration wing of the Finns Party was significant enough for the general public to consider the Hommaforum collective as essentially a representative of the party (see Hatakka 2017, 2033), and that Hommaforum gave rise to a movement which eventually took over the leadership of the Finns Party. What is, then, the relationship between online right-wing countermedia, namely WTF, and the Finns Party? WTF was founded in 2014 by Ilja Janitskin, a media entrepreneur and ex-Bandidos motorcycle club member, and focuses on anti-immigration news stories. It has no official connection to the Finns Party or Hommaforum, and discussants on Hommaforum have at times been quite critical of the news site, as has Hommaforum founder (and Finns Party newspaper editor) Matias Turkkila (SK 5 Feb 2016). In return, WTF has been fiercely critical of Turkkila, calling him a "mole" for "the multiculturalists" (WTF 6 Feb 2016). But there is a clear ideological and stylistic connection between the right-wing populism of WTF Media and that of the contemporary Finns Party, to the extent that the successes of both definitely feed into each other. Out of the six largest parties, Finns Party members trust WTF most as a medium (SK 21 Dec 2016), local Finns Party politicians have been vocal defenders of WTF founder Ilja Janitskin (Iltalehti 29 Sep 2016), and out of all parties in parliament, Finns Party politicians overwhelmingly most often use language that is typical of WTF (Ylä-Anttila, Bauvois and Pyrhönen 2019). The significant role of online alternative media for populist politics further highlights the need

for understanding political developments broadly, taking into account parties, movements, all forms of media, and grassroots action – the limits between which are ever-harder to draw.

Conclusions

This paper has dealt with online and social media in relation to populist political movements, and the Finns Party in particular. While online media and its proliferation can boost the success and acceptance of populism due to various mechanisms, in the case of the Finns Party, the party itself was not willing or able to take advantage of these, but an online right-wing populist movement did come into being, with transnational influence, and ended up transforming the Finns Party from the inside out. I will conclude by briefly assessing the six posited mechanisms between populism and social media in light of the Finns Party case.

First, the point that a people-centric medium such as the internet is particularly conducive for populist mobilization (Engesser, Fawzi and Larsson 2017; Gerbaudo 2014; Keen 2017; Moffitt 2018) is neatly illustrated in the Finnish case – especially if we understand it in the sense that online, an organic mobilization of a movement, viewing itself as a democratic sovereign people, oppressed by an elite, can take place – in contrast to the view of populist politicians merely claiming to represent the people from the top down. The Finns Party itself did not attempt such claims towards an online public, but an online counterpublic did form and take the party as its vessel.

Second, also the claim that potentially mobilizable populist citizens are readily found in online spaces (Ellinas 2018; Engesser, Fawzi and Larsson 2017; Krämer 2017) was shown by this case. The discussion board Hommaforum, and Jussi Halla-aho's blog before it, provided a platform for a political community and identity to form and to adopt certain practices and objectives, as described by Krämer (2017). Similar developments have taken place elsewhere, e.g. in the United States and Sweden (Nagle 2017; Törnberg and Törnberg 2016).

Third, in this process of identity-formation, the echo chamber effect of like-minded people reinforcing the views of each other (Engesser, Fawzi and Larsson 2017; Flaxman, Goel and Rao 2016; Karlsen et al. 2017) has certainly been observed on Hommaforum (Ylä-Anttila 2018). However, in the Finnish case, it is unclear if the public sphere in general has been polarized by a social media effect. While some such online opinion communities surely exist on the liberal left, they are by no means as large or politically significant as Hommaforum has been. Ideologically, the Green Party is considered the opposite and indeed opponent of the Finns Party, but does not have a similar online presence or discursive space; instead its activists are dispersed around various mainstream services within the larger online public sphere, such as Facebook and Twitter. The echo chamber polarization thesis is largely based on the US two-party system and may not be fully applicable to a consensual multi-party system. However, this issue would definitely warrant further study in the Finnish case.

Fourth, the social media attention economy thesis (Berger and Milkman 2012; Engesser, Fawzi and Larsson 2017; Moffitt 2016) is also not as readily applicable to the Finnish anti-immigration

movement, as it has thus far been primarily organized around a discussion forum rather than assembling via the kind of social media that is based on feeds and algorithms (such as Facebook and Twitter). But considering the wider media sphere and its hybridization (Chadwick 2016; Herkman and Matikainen 2017), the Finns Party have certainly benefited from the logic of the attention economy, since even traditional mass media now have to adjust their output to be "social media friendly" in order to attract readers, engagement, and ultimately advertising revenue. Indeed, social and traditional media seem to exist in somewhat of a symbiosis in Finland as elsewhere, which benefits populists (Herkman and Matikainen 2017).

Fifth, the fact that populists and their supporters often accuse mainstream media of bias and discrimination (Engesser et al. 2017; Manucci 2017) certainly affected the consolidation of the Finnish anti-immigrant scene online before taking parliamentary shape in the Finns Party. One of the most common discontents heard from Finnish anti-immigration activists is that they are not heard in the wider public sphere, have no voice, and are "not allowed to have their opinion" (Vihavainen, Hamilo and Konstig 2015), as has been found in the US (Davey and Ebner 2017).

And finally, sixth, the case of the Finns Party gives a dire warning for populist politicians who consider turning to social media because they have no resources to get their messages on mainstream media (Hatakka 2017; Moffitt 2018; Sakki and Pettersson 2016) – this might result in a total loss of control (Carlson, Djupsund and Strandberg 2013; Eranti and Lindman 2014). Indeed, the Finns Party had barely any resources for professional campaigning via mainstream channels (Moring and Mykkänen 2012), which surely contributed to the party leadership's decision to let the online anti-immigration movement take care of online campaigning, which in turn enabled the movement to co-opt the party brand. From the viewpoint of the anti-immigration movement, this was a tremendous success, but from the viewpoint of the party establishment, it proved disastrous, as the budding online movement eventually swallowed the party. For scholars of populism, the case of the Finns Party should illustrate the tremendous potential influence of online mobilization.

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